

Releasing TFX Testimony Pentagon, Senate Clash Over

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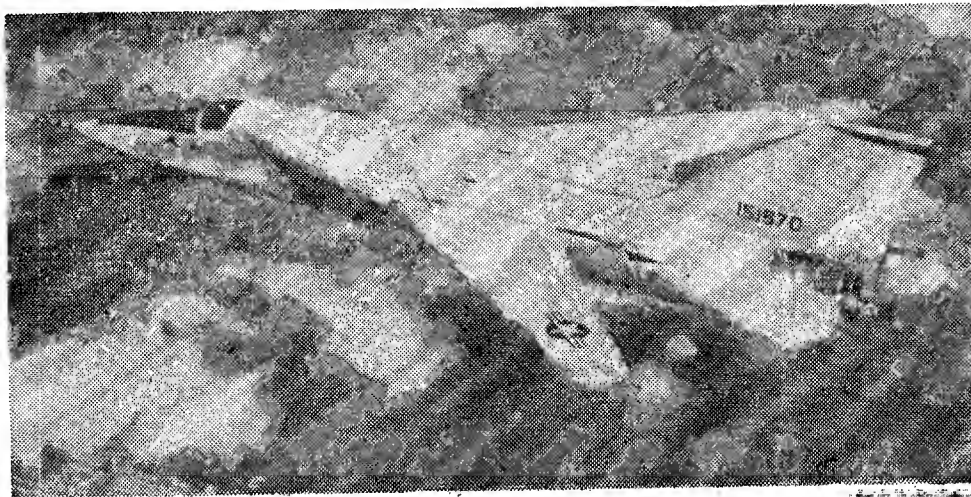
The Senate and Pentagon are fighting over releasing testimony that says the Navy TFX airplane has more than 100 shortcomings and is incapable of carrier-based operations."

Such testimony already has prompted the Senate Appropriations Committee to demand that the Navy prove the value of the plane before full production begins.

Senate critics, led by Sen. John L. McClellan (D-Ark.), will make their full case against the airplane when the fiscal 1968 defense appropriations bill comes up on the floor.

The bill was expected to come up today. But the illness of Chairman Richard B. Russell (D-Ga.) of the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee puts the time table in doubt.

The Subcommittee held a special hearing July 14 on the TFX, with McClellan asking most of the questions and confronting Navy witnesses with a number of reports critical of the plane's performance.



United Press International

The Navy TFX, designated the F-111B, center of Pentagon and Senate fight.

That hearing, plus interviews with military critics of the Navy TFX program, show these as the central issues now buffeting the controversial plane:

The plane—on the basis of flight tests so far—is deficient in how long it can remain on station at high altitudes. The plane also weighs more than

it was supposed to and cannot accelerate as fast as specified in the contract.

The critics claim this adds up to an airplane with marginal flight performance. It is not maneuverable enough, goes the argument, to take on a hot fighter in close combat.

The Navy TFX, designated the F-111B and built by Gener-

al Dynamics and Grumman, will rely on air-to-air missiles to take on enemy aircraft. Critics claim this armament, even if supplemented by a fast-firing gun later on, would not overcome the plane's maneuverability shortcomings in a dogfight.

Navy leaders are now describing the F-111B as a mis-

sile platform. Originally, the F-111B was envisioned as the carrier-based fighter of the future.

Adm. David L. McDonald, chief of Naval Operations at the time of the hearing, said in the testimony now in contention, that "it eased the minds of a lot of people" when the Navy decided it would put another fighter with the F-111B on carriers.

Navy test pilots flew the F-111B this spring and submitted their critique on June 1. They listed 100 deficiencies where "correction is mandatory" and another 15 changes that were desirable.

The pilots said in their report that "The F-111B remains unfit for service use as previously reported and was found to be incapable of carrier-based operations."

Last month, the Naval Air

Systems Command analyzed this report and concluded that 23 of the 100 mandatory corrections would be difficult to make or else, if made, might not be effective.

Critics contend the inlet that takes air for the engine should be relocated and enlarged. The engine has partially stalled in the past, evidently because the air going into it was too turbulent as it came off the metal skin of the airplane. Suggestions include moving the inlet farther out from the fuselage. But this would increase drag, slowing down the plane.

It is now estimated each F-111B will cost \$8 million, and more if the ground support equipment that goes with it is counted. The original estimate was \$2.9 million. Critics claim this is too high a price to pay for a plane of little value to the Navy.

Backers of the F-111B make these counter-arguments:

- The plane, with the ability to fly both high and low at supersonic speed and carry a wide variety of armaments on long missions, offers the most performance of any aircraft ever built.

- The Navy test pilots are purposely overcritical, and the faults they found with the F-111B in tests this spring are normal for a plane in this stage of development. All but six of the 100 mandatory corrections, said one source, are already being made.

- As for being unfit for carrier operations, the Navy test pilots made their judgment on the fifth test airplane turned out. The new ones coming along will have the improvements to overcome the shortcomings of early models.

valid because the TFX pro-

gram has undergone many changes since the original estimates were made in 1963.

The Senate Appropriations Committee decided that criticism was serious enough to warrant restraints on the F-111B program. The Committee voted unanimously to reduce the Pentagon request for the F-111B from \$287 million to \$115 million—enough money to buy six more planes instead of the requested 20.

More significant, the Committee said in its report that production of the plane should not get under way until the Navy determine whether it is suitable for carrier use. The report forbids the Navy to buy planes beyond the six approved for fiscal 1968 until that determination is made. This prohibition, if the House goes along, will further delay the F-111B program—already two years behind schedule.

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